

The sertão is peaceful now -- or relatively so at least. Of course there may be a shooting or a knife killing now and then, but that may happen anywhere. And family feuds are not entirely unknown. But it is not like it used to be. The improved roads, and generally better communications, have made possible the more efficient policing of that remote region, and times generally seem to have quieted down. But not many years have passed since the time that the greatest scenic wonder in the North, the Paulo Afonso Falls, was seldom visited, because people were afraid to risk their lives in that back country. When I went to Brazil in 1935, travel anywhere in the sertão was considered risky, as one might easily meet up with cangaceiros, who would certainly take anything of value possessed by the traveler, but might very well leave his bones to be picked by urubús in that vast and desolate land.

Figueiredo's dictionary defines cangaceiro as a man who goes about heavily and ostentatiously armed; but in the usage of Pernambuco a cangaceiro was a bandit. (I once heard a man refer to a prostitute as a cangaceira.) A number of bands of cangaceiros were to be found in those days, who exercised varying degrees of activity and ferocity; but the outstanding one, who left a name never to be forgotten in the sertão, was Lampião.

A lampião is a street lamp, or other large lamp. The bandit is said to have received this as a nickname, due to the fact that his rifle, according to popular legend, was fired so continuously that instead of giving out intermittent flashes it made a constant glow, like a street lamp. However that may be, he had borne the name for so long that few, if any, could be found who were able to tell his original name. A great many stories are told about him, many of them probably exaggerated. I heard a number of them in the course of the time I stayed, and managed to retain a few particulars. But if someone could take the pains to follow up his story, sift the evidence and find the truth of the matter, I feel sure that Lampião would be found worthy of his niche in the hall of notoriety alongside such men as Jesse James, Billy the Kid, Rube Burroughs, John A. Murrell, and others. He might even be found worthy to head this list.

Lampião had, of course, a band of followers, varying in number at different times, sometimes reaching twenty-five or thirty. I believe there were only eight with him when the gang was finally brought to book in 1938. Prominent among his followers was a woman, the wife or concubine of Lampião, a frightful looking old hag who was known to the world as Maria Bonita (pretty Mary). Who can tell by what term of endearment she may have been known to the bandit himself?

Lampião and his gang had no certain dwelling place, but moved about, always on the move both to avoid pursuit and to seek fresh spoils. They traveled on horseback, and as there were no motor roads in those days, no telephones and few telegraph lines, by the time the gang's presence could be reported in one section they were usually far away. They would drop in at some remote fazenda, demand food and other comforts, especially the husband's privilege of the wife or daughters of the fazendeiro, and if well treated they would exact only a modest tribute, that is, anything that they wanted, that could be taken away, and no further violence would be offered. If any resistance was encountered the family would be butchered, and the house burned, after looting.

There was a time when Lampião was very bold, and on numerous occasions he sent a letter to some business man in one or another of the numerous small towns scattered about the sertão, stating that unless a certain sum of money were delivered to his messenger at a time and place determined, the man would be killed, and his home and business looted. The men thus addressed generally sent the money demanded, although they had no positive assurance that by doing so they would be exempt from attack; but they were reluctant to take chances with so desperate a character. I believe that on several occasions Lampião did actually carry out these threats. It is highly probable that many lesser bandits used the name of Lampião for making extortions in this way, knowing the terror in which people stood of the man. Early in 1936 a business man in Garanhuns received such a note, purporting to be from Lampião, but many people thought that it was a forgery, as it was not his custom to venture so near the large cities. (Garanhuns is on the railway, and less than 200 miles from Recife.) However it may have been, the man felt sure Lampião, if it were he, would not have the courage to carry out his threat. He therefore disregarded the note, and nothing came of it. But

by that time Lampião's star was near its setting, though he may not have suspected the fact.

There was no telling where he would be met with. A friend of mine, traveling in a car along one of the few roads where a car might go with difficulty, passed the still smoking remains of a plantation house that Lampião had just looted and burned. Another acquaintance of mine, traveling on horseback with a few friends, was actually stopped by Lampião and his gang, but being in a jovial mood that day he contented himself with merely taking their horses and money, doing no violence to their persons.

I find no evidence that there existed anything of the Robin Hood in Lampião. If he ever did a kind deed to anybody it has been forgotten. But he did have a sort of grim sense of humor. The story is told of a visit that he made to a lonely cabin, where he saw a turkey, and demanded that the owner cook it for his dinner at once. The man did so, but in his excitement forgot to put salt in it. When Lampião tasted the meat he sent immediately and got a kilo (2.2lbs.) of salt, and commanded the man to eat it all. It has been a long time since that story was told to me, and I have forgotten whether the man died as a result of eating the salt, or was shot for being unable to eat all of it.

Another story that is told of Lampião is that on a certain occasion he and his gang happened on a house where a dance was in progress. The bandits took control of things, and then, for their amusement, commanded all the men and women to disrobe completely, and continue with the dancing. Any male member of the company who, under these unusual circumstances, showed visible signs of excitement was then and there deprived of his manhood, there being no lack of sharp tools for this primitive surgery.

The police tried for years to take Lampião, and sent any number of expeditions after him. One thing in his favor was the facility of playing tag back and forth across the state line of Pernambuco and Alagoas; and he even went farther afield into Paraíba and Ceará, and probably Bahia, or even Piauí. It may be noted from the map that all these states are fairly close together ^{in the} neighborhood of the westernmost extremity of Pernambuco. Time after time there would be rumors that he had been

captured, or that he was surrounded, and was on the verge of being captured; but afterwards would come the report that he had escaped again.

The police were too few, and not very efficient. In those days the state police were very poorly paid, so that few people sought the service as a career if anything else was open to them. The police went in fear of the bandits, and with good reason; for after all they had often to go on duty alone in remote places, and it was not considered healthy to let Lampião hear that such and such a policeman had been over zealous in pursuit of him -- he might find him at an inconvenient time. Also the policemen were often required to make their homes in small interior places, and they had families on whom vengeance might be taken. The bandits usually had superiority of numbers and equipment, and it behooved the trooper not to be too active.

Besides, the bandits had an advantage. Policemen are not supposed to go about shooting people on suspicion, while the bandits were bothered by no such scruples. They had long since ceased to count their victims, and another more or less made little difference to them. They would shoot first, and investigate afterwards.

But apparently the police occasionally were driven to such tactics. A friend of mine told me of a trip he took once on a train through a part of the sertão where the bandits were believed to be. There was a detachment of police on the train, one of the many expeditions sent out to capture Lampião, dead or alive. As the train rocked along through that waste land, one of the policemen, trigger happy in the security of numbers, fancied he saw one of the bandits, or somebody, or something, among the trees, and fired at it through the open window. His companions, uncertain whether the shot had come from inside the train or outside, resolved to give the matter the benefit of the doubt, and began firing into the woods at random. The passengers, certain that the war was on, and that the fire would be returned, prostrated themselves on the floor of the car, while the police kept on firing. As my friend told the story, there must have been two or three hundred rounds fired before the police began to come to their senses and know that there was nothing to shoot at.

It was in Alagoas that they got him at last, in May of 1938, as well as I remember. The "Department of Public Safety", as they call it, tired of its former policy of

"too little and too late", resolved to send an expedition capable of doing the job. I have talked with the lieutenant who commanded the expedition, and he told me of how, after discovering that the bandits were in a certain house, he managed to place his men about the house in such positions that there was no possible chance for the bandits to escape, all before giving notice of their presence by firing through the windows. Lampião and his gang came out shooting, and died gamely with their boots on, Maria Bonita along with the rest.

It was necessary to take back to the capital some proof of their success; and the **police**, following a time honored custom, cut off the heads of their victims, and putting them in a sack, delivered them to the authorities in Maceió. Some enterprising photographer lined up the heads and made a picture of them — as grisly a spectacle as one could wish to see. Picture post cards were made from this, and sold extensively all over the region. One of the teachers at our school stuck one up on the bulletin board, as a grim reminder to the students that crime does not pay.